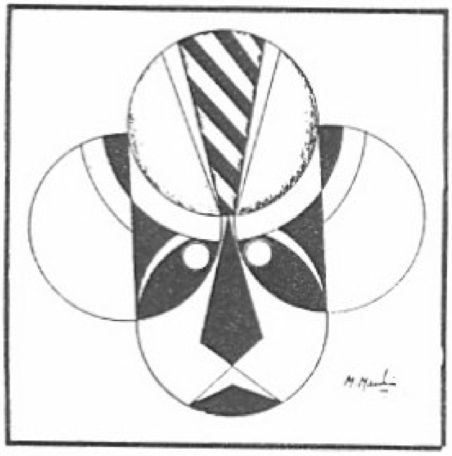
The Melting Stone : From Criticism to Creativity

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PASIJHAIT PATHAR (Play) by Ramdev Jha, Bihar : Sankalplok, 1989, pp. 152, Rs. 20.

RAMDEV Jha has rendered invaluable service to literature by bringing out edited works like *Haragaurii vivaah naatak, Raam vijay naatak, Nandiipati giitimaalaa* as well as a book of songs found in the inscriptions in Nepal. He is equally well known for his longish critical studies such as *Maithili Shaiva Saahityak Bhuumikaa, Maithili Shaiva Sahitya,* and *Umapati,* besides other edited collections : *Maithili Prachin Giitavali* and *Kavivar Jivan Jha rachanavali.* But that he has been also a fiction writer with at least four collections (*Ek khira : tin ohank, Manuk santan, Dharti mata,* and *Ijoti ranii*) has not gone unnoticed. *Pasijhait pathar* (The melting stone) is an unusual collection of seven plays of different types, topics, treatments, and of varying length. Besides the lead play *Pasijhait pathar,* after which the collection has been christened, the collection has the following plays :

Lochan dhaay phedhaayal, (Eyes are tired waiting forbearingly) a one-act stage play with three scences, based on the life and times of Vidyapati, where we find him taking shelter in a friendly kingdom, without revealing his own or Queen Lakhima's

identity, but where they find their wait for twelve long years becoming unbearable in the absence of any news of her husband, King Shivasimha; *Rahay diyah Gangaa ken nirmal,* (Let the Ganges remain pure) a one-act play with five scenes revolving around the problem of corruption in public examination and how a teacher puts up a brave fight resisting all pressures on him to increase somebody's marks in return for some consideration, where the moral is to let the islands of purity remain as they are; *Dulaarak bhuukh,* (The hunger of love), a short play of two scenes on the problem of a childless couple and how they get over their personal tragedy by choosing to meet a bigger tragedy of the acute poverty of a neighbour whose uncared for children are adopted by them without any self-interest, only to give them better education, food and clothing; *Manushyak devata,* (The God among men) another play in two scenes depicting how a village doctor is dedicated to his patients, even when his own married but unemployed son falls a victim to circumstances; *Pipaasaa,* (The thirst) a neo-mythical short play of only one scene, which shows how important it is for all learned people to realize the futility of the man-made division of 'castes', where the story revolves around the test Lord Krishna and the God-King Indira wanted to perform on the thirsty sage Uttank who is ready to die in thirst but who still would not accept howsoever pure water there may be, from a 'lowly' person; and *Cananak Basat,* (The breeze of the sandalwood) a longish one-act with four scenes, the main theme being how a group of young men who want to improve the living conditions and employment opportunities of the poor and hapless villagers face stiff resistance from their village elders who have vested interest in the status quo but who finally give up and agree that the new wind—the breeze of the sandal-wood tree—cannot be, and should not be, stopped.

It is not difficult to guess that there is not thematic or structural unity among these plays. Some are full-length plays, while others are one-acts, or even skits. Some are historical or mythological in reference and context, while others refer to Ramdev's concern for social malaise such as the system of dowry. A number of these plays were written as radio plays. The lead play was first broadcast long back under a different title: *Sindurak mol* (The

price of the nuptial knot) from the All India Radio, Darbhanga. The modified version of it, under the name *Pasijhait pathar*, was also put up on stage by the students of Mithila University in the same year. To return to their variety, while some of these are recently written plays, other are quite old, and have been staged many times. For instance, the lead play was written and performed first in 1976, and many a time subsequently, although it remained unpublished until 1989. To that extent, the award has once again established the creative faculty of an otherwise well-known critic.

The author claims that *Pasijhait pathar* has a special feature in that one could either perform any one of its acts independently (or, I would say, put it up as an episode in a serialized broadcast) or start from any act to go up to the end at the desired point without creating any problem for the spectators or listeners in comprehending the story line or enjoying the performance. The first act (which has been included in this write-up under the 'excerpts') surely makes the play quite attractive. It has the additional advantage of introducing the topic, characters and tenor of the play, too. Besides two characters (Dhaneshwar and Chanan) of the principal story, the act involves the spectators through three other subsidiary persons: Secretary and two Spectators. One group is shown as trying to stop the performance because it allegedly paints one of the living persons in the village (Dhaneshwar) black. The others argue that the play is not written to portray a specific person or his atrocious ways of doing things but that it is a picture of the greater malaise that has plagued the whole society, and particularly the rural areas. The act ends in the triumph of the group that wants to put up the performance.

The author quite rightly describes the intention of the young men and women depicted in the play (both as actors and cast in social roles) as well as his own intentions aptly through a simile: Just as the river water gushes out of a melting stone from top of the hill, so also age-old customs, traditions and socioeconomic behaviour of a class of people would eventually be shattered to make way for what is a guileless, harmonious and empathetic way of living, where a father does not have to kill himself to let his family claim insurance money to pay for his marriageable daughter's

dowry, or where a miserly money-lender and a vile person does not have to wait for his daughter-in-law to come and reform him leading to a complete change of heart, or where the poor and the hapless do not have to await the official declaration on land reforms and bonded labourers to claim the piece of land they have been traditionally tilling.

Excerpt

FIRST ACT

[Place : The stage, decorated. There are spectators sitting in front. The opening music could be heard. The music stops all of a sudden. The secretary of the drama troupe appears on the stage, dressed in khadi dhoti and kurta, and a shawl on his shoulders.]

Secretary : [*Greets all the spectators who have assembled.*] Friends and lovers of theatre. It gives me immense pleasure to see you all who have kindly come here to watch this performance being put up by a group of young people without much resources.

Spectator 1 : That is enough. Why don't you start the play now? We are all tired of sitting here waiting.

Secretary : Please be quiet. It wouldn't take much time for the play to begin. The play which we are going to put up today...

Spectator 2 : See, everybody is getting bored.

Secretary : Gentleman, please have patience. A few enthusiastic young men are going to demonstrate their artistic credentials. Even if it becomes necessary to take some trouble for that, you must bear with them and encourage them. How can a performance begin if there is so much disturbance?

Chanan : [*Rising from among the spectators*] Mr. Secretary, Sir! I want to see who has guts to block the play?

Secretary : I have definite news that some people have not taken kindly to this performance of youngsters. I would, therefore, pray to you to kindly remain seated in peace. It is possible that some people will become violent, pelt stones, or even attempt to tear off curtains or set fire to the stage. But for that you must not be scared or worried. Especially, the women present here should not feel afraid.

Chanan : You are unduly worried, Sir. We are not weak. Anyone who tries to create problems for our performance will learn a lesson today.

Spectator 1 : Why don't you begin the play, boy?

Chanan : Shut up! The play WILL begin. Let me see who dares to stop it. Let him come forward!

Spectator 2 : Hey! You think too much of yourself, kid? I'll slash your tongue.

Spectator 1 : Hey You! Stop the play, I say... [*shouts*]! Lift the curtains!

[*Both these spectators move towards the stage menacingly.*]

Chanan : [*Runs and stops the two.*] Where are you going? Better talk to me first!

[These three people get involved in brawl and eventually shift on the stage. This creates a flutter among the spectators.]

Secretary : [*Tries to separate the three.*] Hey! Why are you doing all this?

Spectator 1 : In a village of Brahmins, who is this lowly priest making pedigrees? This will end your vanity, you swine!

[*Spectator 2 tries shaking a pillar violently to remove the support for the stage. Chanan lifts him*

up and throws him overboard, and finally sits on this man.]

Chanan : Now let's see how you stop the play. Stop the performance. [*holds both by their hair and presses their head downwards as his jaws harden*] You small creatures... trying to stop the fire of our time.... you would arrest the storm and torrent, would you? Now why don't you try stopping this play? Come on, try your tricks!

Secretary : [*Tries to lift Chanan to bring order but fails.*] Chanan! What are you doing? Leave them! Be done with!

Dhaneshwar : [*appears on the stage from among the spectators in an agitated manner with a hunter in hand.*] I have had too much of your boasting. I will beat the hell out of you. I will clip your wings... if not, uproot them. [*Pushes Chanan hard so that he rolls on the ground, and then lifts him by his collar and drags him up to some distance to give him a taste of the hunter. The Secretary stops Dhaneshwar even before he lashes out at Chanan.*]

Secretary : Dhaneshwar-babu! Please calm down! Cool down, please!

Dhaneshwar : [*pushing him hard* You too, get out of my sight! Or else. I will see the end of your barristry.

Secretary : An established person of your stature should not be so taken in!

Dhaneshwar : Don't take me to be an impotent fool who will stand all the insults, abuses and character assassination silently. I am strong enough to burn each of your boys who participates in this play.

Secretary : Who says you are to be painted black in this play?

Spectator 1 : We know! The play is meant to be a parody of Dhaneshwar-babu's life. It says he demands a lot of money to fix his son's marriage... says he lends money to make the farm workers work as bonded labourers on his field only because of

his high interest rates. It says he forcibly occupies defaulters' houses... he doesn't even spare his relatives. It shows him inciting everybody in the village to fight against everybody else.

Secretary : Today the whole society has many such people. Our story is not about a particular person. It is a picture of the whole society. It depicts the pain we all bear. It unfolds the drama of our life ... no, it is not merely a play. It is a mirror of our lives' inferno. It is also the stream of nectar born out of the heart of the stone which has melted in this inferno.

Chanan : Is there only one Dhaneshwar Babu that he feels so hurt?

Dhaneshwar : Shut up! [*Moving towards Chanan menacingly*] Hey! Do you think you have become Gama, the Great Wrestler? [*catches him by the neck and gives him a few quick slaps. The Secretary tries to separate them.*]

Secretary : Dhaneshwar-babu! You are now committing an impropriety. This is sheer atrocity. You should take a look at the blowing wind of our time. You can't stop this wind.

Dhaneshwar : It is because of you that I am swallowing all these. If anybody else had done this, or said all these, I would have by now poured kerosene on him and set him aflame.

Secretary : There was a time when you could do it. The people were scared of you then. They used to flee for fear of life. Now the fear is gone, gone are your special charms! The vessel of vice lies smashed. Now you would surely find a few people who are ready to die.

Dhaneshwar : Let me see who is ready to die!

Secretary : You are still in your world of make-believe. If you so wish, you can get your tin of kerosene. Here I am... waiting for you.

Chanan : Secretary-saheb, I am standing here too. Let him first pour kerosene on me.

Secretary : Dhaneshwar-babu! It will be kind of you if you now get off the stage and let the play begin! Let the spectators think this too was a scene from the play.

Dhaneshwar : There will NOT BE any play! Lift the curtains and stop the play!

Secretary : [*smiles sarcastically*] There WILL BE a play! It will be performed and will depict your misdeeds. Let me make it very clear to you. By bringing in a dozen miscreants and ruffians you should not imagine that you would be able to drive away this large crowd of humanity! [*shows all the spectators.*]

Dhaneshwar : I am telling you, there will be a blood bath... [*raises his voice and calls*] Where is everybody gone? Call all my men!

[*A few people try to get up from among the spectators but others around them force them to sit down.*]

Secretary : It's no use calling them. Each one of your men is surrounded by three of our men. [*Scolds the two spectators who were by then standing in a corner of the stage.*] Hey, you guys! What are you doing here on the stage? Get off the stage! I say, get out of here! [*Both the spectators are taken aback. The Secretary looks at Chanan. Chanan holds them both by their neck and pushes them down the stage.*]

Dhaneshwar : Chananma you.... swine, death is hanging on your head!

Secretary : Let the God of Death dance on... you needn't worry about it.

Chanan : You should better be gone.

Dhaneshwar : Chananma? If I do not recover all debts from your father by tomorrow, I am not worth my salt.

Chanan : Yes, yes ... recover them.

Dhaneshwar : And you have to vacate my land by tomorrow!

[*While going away*] And I shall see which son of the bitch comes in to your rescue then! [*exits*].

Chanan : All right! We too shall see!

Secretary : [*turning towards the spectators*] What do you all say? Shall we begin the play?

Spectators : Yes, yes! Let the play start!

Chanan : [*in excitement*] Inquilab, zindabad! Our drama.. has to happen! Inquilab, zindabad! zindabad, zindabad.

Secretary : Let the 'zindabad' stop! And,... let the play begin!

[*Chanan and Secretary go away in opposite directions.*]

Translated from Maithili
by Udaya Narayana Singh